

## ON SPINOZA AND FREE THOUGHT

### Text 1. Baruch Spinoza, *Theological-Political Treatise* (1670)

#### I. Introduction

When the sun rose above the heads of Adam and Eve the very first morning, God Himself warned them about the risks of eating from the tree which stood at the very centre of the Paradise that he had devised and designed for them. Adam and Eve, of course, bowed down to God's will, and swore not to eat any of the Fruits that hung from the branches of the tree. However, when the Devil in snake hung from those very same branches and tempted them with words of freedom and pleasure, Adam and Eve could not resist and bowed down to a new emotion which had just arisen in them. The sweet taste of rebellion.

This, which to some is just a story, a nice one or a vacuous one, and to others represents the pillar of their faith, is, however, a very good metaphor to represent the fact that it seems to be in the roots of our behaviour as humans to go against the power that oppresses us, without, or even with, our permission. From our first steps we thrive in getting out of our mother's loving yet repressing arms and get running, running away from that higher power which, in its ulterior need to protect us makes us feel imprisoned.

Spinoza, who he himself suffered the dangers and the negative effects of going against the laws that had been established in his religious community, claims that << *it is impossible to act against the sovereign's decisions without prejudicing his authority (...)*>>. However, he continues writing in order to proclaim that it is indeed necessary and fundamental that we can speak and judge without any restriction, as long as we do so guided by reason alone, and stepping away from the use of any evil paths to impose our own will upon that of the State.

Thus, we come to an interesting situation. If we follow Spinoza's words, then we can and we have to draw a very clear line between the Law of the State, by which every man has to abide, and that of their own self, their own conscious, which allows him to speak and form thoughts freely, and even communicate them, as long as in doing so he is not looking to redraw himself the laws according to his own will and decision.

To analyse this apparently oxymoronic opposition between freedom and the rule of Law we must first analyse the concept of freedom, then that of the State, and finally collate the two definitions to see if there is any space in between for man to be free while still following the rules of the sovereign power.

## II. On the concept of freedom

Freedom is a word that fills our mouth when we pronounce it, slipping through our tongue with a bittersweet taste. Sweet, because it brings to our minds the concept of happiness, life and exhilaration, which albeit not necessarily correlated seem to have formed a core of ideals that every modern man holds dear in his heart. Bitter, because we seem to be in the delusion that it is an unattainable right. Yet, freedom has not always represented such a thing. Actually, freedom has experienced a particularly thorough evolution as a concept through the sands of time.

If we were to travel back to the times of Athens and Sparta, we would probably be surprised to see that to those who we consider our first referents and guides in the twisting turns and mazes of philosophical discussion, freedom was not something that the individual himself was able to possess. Freedom was a political matter at best, and it only came to those *polis* who were able to defend and protect their own sovereignty, not being subdued and submitted to other *polis*' will. Therefore, sovereignty, the capacity to impose our objectives and intentions upon others, was something that only a collective could attain. Individual freedom was not something that mattered during pre-modernity, when the Universe was an organized whole, a *cosmos*, and humans themselves had a role at the centre of that *cosmos*, dividing themselves into perfectly organized stratum which set your destiny from the moment you were born. Much like the ideal form of government devised by Plato in his *Republica*, humans were but pawns in a game of chess played by their superior forces which looked mainly for the greater good.

However, pre-modernity came to a halt in the nineteenth century, when Romanticism managed to wreak havoc on that pre-designed Heaven, as the first ray of the storm which had been brewing from the moment the first enlightened scholar proclaimed the need to establish a set of rights particular to each individual, not to a collective. Romanticism was the birth of the *modern man*, that who left behind the search for the beautiful and thrived on the sublime. Modernity brought about the birth of the ideals which still shape our cultural and political paradigm, though we may discuss, as I will do later in the essay, if such a root is still pertinent or not. Much like the men guided by Cyrus the Young in the *Anabasis* described by Xenophon, the romantics set on a road unexplored until the moment, that which brought them to the depths of the human soul and which provided them with the concept of individual freedom. Such a thing was not but the ability to live without submitting to the orders of society, being able to express their own traits without having to shape them to the expectations of the group around them. If we were to establish a connection, we could say that the romantics desired to break the hylomorphic system, not the epistemological one, but the political one, bringing down the societal forms to which the matter of each of the people who inhabit the planet had to readapt themselves to.

So, if during pre-modernity freedom was a common matter of State, a preoccupation of all the inhabitants of a territory to avoid being submitted to other states' wishes, and modernity claimed for the emancipation of the individual from the chains that bound it to the *mores* of a society which seemed to have become *moros*, where does that leave freedom for the *post-modern man*? Because

we are, indeed, living in postmodernity, in a time of change, crisis and cathartic situations that, if developed correctly, should make the romantic man become what I may call *the homo democraticus*.

### III. The State

But before I delve deeper into what might be *the homo democraticus*, I think it might be necessary to explore the other preeminent concept that arises in Spinoza's text, that is, the *State*. What is the State? Why does it hold the sovereignty of a community? And much more important, is its rule absolute and incontestable?

In the Ancient world, the State was but a name given to the united voice of the most powerful men of a community who came together to decide the future of the territories that came under their common possessions. The State was an imposition, at best, of one set of individuals upon others. However, and much as freedom changed with the course of time, so did the State, until becoming what it is now. Wait. What is it now?

Let's for a second forget theoretical explanations and cross the blurred although often mistakenly harsh line between theory and practice in the philosophical field. There where I come from, schools often establish a system of self-government for classes. This way, each class will elect a delegate, a representative of sorts, who will be in charge of voicing their opinions and looking for the best interest for the class. However, this last week I witnessed the failure which lies at the heart of this system. When we, the delegates, were asked to help fix the dates for the final exams of the school year, I was surprised to see that most delegates did express their opinions and theirs only, sidestepping their classes' sovereignty and imposing their own upon them. Those who did ask their classes about what they preferred were later treated to quick glances of disapproval from their peers, who believed that there was no need to do such a thing as by having named them their delegates they had bestowed upon their shoulders an infinite and omnipotent authority to decide about their school lives.

Let me be clear about this. That is not *authoritas*. That is *potestas*. And it does not matter whether there has been a legitimation process which resulted in their election process. Legitimated power is authority indeed, but that legitimation is not a moment in time which disappears in an instant without leaving behind any trace of existence. It is a continuing process, at least if the legitimation is a legal-rational one. Those who are chosen as representatives of their fellow citizens must be, in every moment during their legislature, nothing but a voice of those who have named them so. Much like Tomas Moro explains in his *Utopia*, where the *sifogrants* must come together with their electors often to know their opinions on what is happening in the State.

That is the State. The State must be the extension of the individual's will, who by delegating part of their autonomous sovereignty upon themselves on others expect to have it heard and respected by those who are gifted with the honour of public service. And yes, this is indeed a critic to all those

representative democracies who have been corrupted with the germen of *partitocracy*, if I may so name it, which leads to the misrepresentation of the individual in the institutions which are supposed to be the cameras where the people's sovereignty comes to life and exerts itself upon them. The system I have described is what the *post-modern State could be*. The modern State, however, has seen itself affected by the evils of misrepresentation, wrongly executed delegation of sovereignty and the monopoly of political power by certain organizations who have not worried about establishing democracy in their own cores. Only certain countries have managed to escape this generalized degeneration of what should have been democracy by building their political systems on the ground of small circumscriptions where the representatives chosen must work their way into the hearts of people, submitting themselves to their scrutiny. And with such a word is that we are led to the final part of the essay.

#### IV. Freedom and State

Kierkegaard proclaimed the *aut-aut*, which came to be a maxim for the Romantic people: you choose whether to abide by the rules of society or to express your individuality in such an exacerbated manner that you can no longer fit in such a community, condemning yourself to the solitude of a *genius*.

We can no longer live by this maxim. It is in our responsibility as inhabitants of an era of crisis, in the most literal meaning of the word, to build the grounds of a new regime. And that regime, in my opinion, should be democracy. But a democracy inhabited not by the last remnants of romantic humanity, but by a new kind of human: the *homo democraticus*, the individual become *citizen*.

When reading Spinoza's text, we should bear in mind that he is one of the most important determinists of History. For him, God and Nature are one and the same, and everything which exists, be it *res extensa* or *res cogitans* are but ways that the will of such a Nature/God has to express itself. However, he will later try to defend a certain freedom in man which can be obtained through one method only: through the realization and the knowledge of the chains that are suppressing him. Once he is conscious about such laws he will be free.

Some may say that this is a weak argument, others will see it as a work of art. Anyway, I see it as useful to explain myself now. I do not intend to go on and on about the concept of freedom in the field of metaphysics, because it does not necessarily concern the same concept but on the area of politics. I finished the previous part of my essay by saying that *scrutiny* is a very important word. It is indeed a fundamental word, or better said, an essential practice for the *homo democraticus*. They who wish to be good citizens must always bear in mind that it depends entirely on him that democracy does not degenerate either into a *partitocracy* or an *ochlocracy*, the government of a mass with no criteria.

In the ancient world, as we have expressed before, individual freedom was not of relevance, when everything that mattered was the survival of the community. The State laid upon the acts of a few select one with the power to rule, and the rest of the inhabitants of a territory were citizens, yes, but not the kind of citizens we are describing here. After Romanticism, and with the adrift of man from a *cosmos* to an extension of his own being to cover for the loss of his position at the centre of a Universe which no longer was an organized whole but an infinite sublimity, freedom became a need for individual expression of the traits that characterized this particular space of creation reserved for each of the human beings.

Spinoza, whether intentionally or not, sets the ground for the next step of that universal spirit of Hegel which is supposed to go always forward. In the text, he claims that to act against the sovereign's decisions is to prejudice his authority. He does not say it is morally wrong. He just states that it is a subversion against the power, because we are questioning its authority. But who gave the authority to such a power besides ourselves? Scrutiny is precisely that which can be read behind Spinoza's words. Scrutiny is the utmost responsibility of the *homo democraticus*, who by assessing continuously whether its representatives are playing by the rules of the democratic game allows for such a game to go on without any breach on law. And so, free thought and the liberty to speak loudly about that which you consider a fault in the system are rights that must be in the core of any regime which aspires to be called a democracy. Much like Erasmus bases his ethics precisely on inner conscious, and much like Spinoza says in the text provided, the citizens are the ones who, guided by that inner voice which claims against the erring of their sovereign power, act by pronouncing themselves loudly against injustice, by communicating their views on their matters of interest and sharing them so with others in order to, together, look for the correction of such faults.

Yet, this is a two-way road. As much as those representatives must admit to being examined profusely and thoroughly, citizens must understand that democracy bases itself on the equality of all its members. If the *homo democraticus* differs in anything from the modern man who arose after the Romanticism it is precisely because democracy finds stability in a society where every individual counts the same. Every voice has the same echo in the vast extensions of democracy, and geniality is, though a wonderful trait which must be exploded for the benefit of oneself and the fellow, not a reason to give anyone special consideration. The citizen so becomes the individual who searches for common happiness and equality.

And so is born the Law. The exacerbation of personal and particular traits present in modernity has ended up in a search for *anomia*, the exemption of any rule. That, in my humble opinion, is a direct way to disaster. Anarchism bases itself on the assumption of a preternatural good will in the core of every human, and until such a thing has proved itself, I believe it to be a risk to assume that a community can lead itself without any rules. Therefore, what I propose for this post-modern State is to create a democracy that corresponds completely to a *nomocracy*, the rule of Law. And for this to come true, this Law must be the written expression of the united will of the inhabitants of the territory which is under the hand of that very same Law. If that Law is described and specified by the representatives, then those representatives must be but a megaphone of their electors. And these electors have to abide by the rules that the community as a whole has established, resigning to impose their own will upon that of others and so caring for the political equality of all individuals, of all citizens.

That is toleration, in its *respect conception*. Whether we will ever arrive at the *esteem conception* is not something I can say, but I do think that the *respect conception* is the soul and fire that drives forward the democratic system. In a society where all citizens are equal, it is profoundly necessary that those citizens do not attack each other in order to establish once more different degrees of dignity for each group. Any difference in a democratic regime which works appropriately must depend solely on merits. The different components of society are responsible for the health of their democracy. The Law must assure the well-being of every political agent, assuring their ability to thrive and prosper, economically, materially, making sure that no one intercepts the ability of their peers to continue down their own road towards the optimisation of their life quality. It is no the matter of the State, and therefore not the matter of the citizens, what each of them decide to pray to, or who do they love, or what they do with their bodies, as long as in doing so they are not hurting the rest of the individuals who would be affected by such an action. That action which is not allowed in the public sphere cannot be allowed in the private one, not because of its significance in the latter but because they were not permitted in the former. Paraphrasing Locke on his *Letter on Tolerance*, if any god wished to let us impose any believes by the use of brute force, he would surely have no problem on sending dragoons of angels ready to take down the unfaithful. The time for *Deus Vult* has passed.

The healthy democracy is an extension of the ideal which guided the ancients, that of *kalos kai agathos*, "*mens sana in corpore sano*", which could now be comprised of a healthy individual in a healthy society, a citizen in a democracy.

And so, much like the Romans invented the afternoon in Virgil's verses << *ite domum saturaе,/ Hesperus Venit,/ ite,/ capullae* >> and the end of the day, and the end of all days was already expressed in the *Darkness* of Byron, we should make ours the words of Blanco White when he says << *Mysterious Night! When our first parent knew/ Thee from report divine, and heard Thy name,/ did he not tremble for this lovely frame,/ this glorious canopy of light and blue?* >>, changing the night for the birth of a new day, a new hope, that will rest bestowed upon the shoulders of democracy as much as it did previously when the sun first rose in the origins of those democracies which, albeit imperfect, gave us the default setting to restart our computers and get rid of those viruses that, much like the virus that recently attacked millions of computers around the world, threaten to end our society.

A democracy where everyone has the same voice, where those voices are heard, where they are not ignored, nor broken by the sword, nor corrupted by anger or hatred which lead to the alteration of the democratic order. A democracy where the *pax romana* is abandoned in search of a *pax democratica*.

The time of Mr Wilcox, the character of *Return to Howards End*, has flown away, and now we must be Helen when she rebels against the repression and the darkness that lurks; we must be Icarus, though wary of the sun; we must be Eneas, fleeing from the war and the bloodshed and the pain of a city destroyed by the immanent desire of humans to impose themselves, and, refugees from a past that shall go away only if we make it do so, help fund the pillars of a new future, a new world where everyone is able to express themselves while respecting the others in search of a common good, a greater good, that is derived directly from the individual benefit. A new hope. But this time it will not be born on a faraway galaxy. It will be born on the hands, sweat and soul of every and each of us.